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SUBJECT: SYRIA: 2009 COUNTRY REPORT ON TERRORISM

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12. (SBU) Designated in 1979 as a State Sponsor of Terrorism, Syria in 2009 continued political support to Palestinian terrorist groups. It also provided political and material support to Hizballah in Lebanon and allowed Iran to resupply this organization with weapons. Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PLFP), and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), among others, base their external leadership in Damascus and operate within Syria's borders. Statements supporting terrorist groups like Hamas and Hizballah permeate government speeches and official statements on a regular basis. The Syrian government insists the Damascus-based groups are confined to political and informational activities, but groups with leaders in Syria have in the past claimed responsibility for anti-Israeli terrorist attacks.

13. (SBU) Over the course of the year, President Bashar al-Asad continued to express public support for Palestinian terrorist groups. Hamas Politburo head and defacto leader Khalid Mesh'al and his deputies continued to reside in Syria. Syria provided a safe haven for Mesh'al and security escorts for his motorcades. Mesh'al freely travels around Damascus, attending numerous public events such as national day celebrations for Arab states. Mesh'al's use of the Syrian Ministry of Information as the venue for press conferences can be taken as an endorsement of Hamas's message. Media reports indicate Hamas used Syrian soil as training grounds for its militant fighters. Though the Syrian government claimed periodically that it used its influence to restrain the rhetoric and activities of Palestinian groups, it allowed rejectionist conferences organized by Hamas to take place over the course of the year.

14. (SBU) Highlighting Syria's ties to the world's most notorious terrorists, Hizballah Operations Chief Imad Mugnyah perished in a car bomb that exploded near Syrian Military Intelligence (SMI) headquarters in the Damascus neighborhood of Kafr Soussa on February 12, 2008. Among other atrocities, Mugnyah was wanted in connection with the 1983 bombings of the Marine barracks and U.S. Embassy in Beirut, which killed over 350. Despite initial attempts to cover up the incident, the Syrian government reluctantly acknowledged some days later that one of the world's most wanted terrorists had been present and died on Syrian soil.

15. (SBU) Syrian officials publicly condemned some acts of terrorism while continuing to defend what they considered to be legitimate armed resistance by Palestinians and Hizballah against Israeli occupation of Arab territory, and by the Iraqi opposition against the "occupation of Iraq."

16. (SBU) Underscoring links between the Syrian government and Hizballah, Israeli naval commandos intercepted a large

cache of arms on November 3 on its way from Iran to Hizballah by way of the Syrian port of Latakia. The arms shipment, which was found amidst civilian cargo on the Antiguan-flagged ship MV Francop, weighed over 500 tons. Press reports quoted Israeli officials stating the quantity of arms seized would have been enough to equip the terrorist group for more than one month of attacks on Israeli cities. While the Syrian government denied involvement in the shipment, Israeli officials stressed the incident illustrates Syria's continued efforts to fight a proxy war with Israel through terrorist groups like Hizballah. Official Syrian statements are peppered with references to "the Israeli enemy," bolstering Israeli concerns.

17. (SBU) Syria continued to strengthen ties with fellow state sponsor of terrorism Iran. Throughout the year, the countries exchanged high-level visitors. In August, President al-Asad visited Tehran. On December 3, the Syrian president met the Iranian National Security Advisor Said Jalili in Damascus. On December 8, Iranian Defense Minister Ahmed Vahidi began a three-day visit to Syria during which he met with political and military leaders. Vahidi and his Syrian counterpart announced agreement on a Syrian-Iranian defense cooperation agreement on December 11. Frequent working-level visits between Iranian and Syrian officials took place throughout 2009. Syria also allowed leaders of Hamas and other Palestinian groups to visit Tehran. Al-Asad continued to be a staunch defender of Iran's policies, including Iran's nuclear ambitions.

18. (SBU) Syria increased border monitoring activities, instituted tighter screening practices on military-age Arab

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males entering its borders, and expressed a desire to increase security cooperation with Iraq. At the same time, Syria remained a key hub for foreign fighters en route to Iraq. The Syrian government continued to harbor former Iraqi regime elements. In September, General Ray Odierno, the U.S. commander in Iraq, stated to the press: "Syria continues to allow the facilitation of foreign fighters through Syria that come both to Iraq as well as, I believe, Afghanistan. We do know that there are some ex-Baathist elements that are funding operations in Iraq, and we also know that they are operating websites that encourage attacks inside Iraq."

19. (SBU) Following August 19 bombing attacks in Baghdad that killed and wounded hundreds, Iraq withdrew its ambassador to Damascus, alleging Syrian government support to Iraqi Baathists it implicated in the attacks. In turn, Syria recalled its ambassador from Baghdad. The Iraqi government demanded the handover of four Iraqi Baathist leaders it claimed are living in Syria. The Syrian government denied involvement in these terrorist attacks, and pledged to act on any "credible evidence" Iraq provided concerning terrorist activities of Iraqi "opposition" members in Syria.

110. (SBU) In 2008, the U.S. Government designated several Iraqis and Iraqi-owned entities residing in Syria which provided financial, material, and technical support for acts of violence that threatened the peace and stability of Iraq, including Mish'an Al-Jaburi and his satellite television channel al-Rai. Iraqi government officials criticize al-Rai for serving as a "platform for terrorists." Media reports in November reported al-Jaburi had sold the equipment and offices of al-Rai to Syrian businessman Rami Makhoul (whom the Treasury Department has designated an individual determined to be responsible for or having benefited from public corruption in Syria), though Makhoul later denied these reports. Observers speculated al-Jaburi and other Iraqi Baathists may also have been linked to a new anti-Iraqi government television station called "Saddam," which completed its inaugural two-day broadcast in late November. Additionally, the U.S. Government designated known foreign fighter facilitators based in Syria, including members of the Abu Ghadiyah network, which orchestrated the flow of

terrorists, weapons, and money from Syria to al-Qa,ida in Iraq. Attacks against Coalition Forces and Iraqi citizens continued to have a destabilizing effect on Iraq's internal security. Though Syrian and Iraqi leaders met throughout the first part of the year both publicly and privately to discuss border enhancements and other measures needed to combat foreign fighter flows, that cooperation has been largely inactive after the withdrawal of the Syrian and Iraqi ambassadors from Damascus and Baghdad, respectively.

¶11. (SBU) Syria remains a source of concern regarding terrorist financing. The Commercial Bank of Syria is subject to U.S. sanctions. Industry experts report that 70 percent of all business transactions are conducted in cash and that nearly 90 percent of all Syrians do not use formal banking services. Despite Syrian legislation requiring money-changers to be licensed by the end of 2007, many money-changers continued to operate illegally in Syria's vast black market, estimated to be as large as Syria's formal economy. Regional "hawala" networks remain intertwined with smuggling and trade-based money laundering - facilitated by notoriously corrupt customs and immigration officials - raising significant concerns that the Syrian government and the business elite are, at the very least, complicit in terror financing schemes.

¶12. (SBU) Syria's government-controlled press continued to tout Syrian regime efforts to combat terrorism. In response to a September 27, 2008 bombing near a Syrian security installation that killed 17, the Syrian security services conducted at least one reported raid on a terror cell residing in the Damascus area, killing and arresting several suspected militants and confiscating a cache of weapons and explosives. Since the attack, the regime has attempted to portray Syria as a victim of terrorism rather than a purveyor of it. The Syrian government explained an explosion of a tourist bus in the Damascus suburb of al-Sayyida Zainab as the result of a tire repair mishap that killed three people, though the presence of shattered windows 200 meters away from the explosion creates some doubt about the source of the explosion.

HUNTER